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## Thinking the Yet to be Thought: envisioning autonomous and alternative pedagogies for socially just education

CATHERINE MONTGOMERY & MAX A. HOPE

**ABSTRACT** This article introduces this Special Issue of *FORUM* with a discussion of freedom and autonomy and considers the ways in which alternative approaches to pedagogy might provide opportunities to address inequalities in the context of education and in society beyond education. The article draws on work carried out in a project funded by an ESRC seminar series grant entitled 'Thinking the 'Yet to be Thought': an international cross-sector seminar series exploring socially just education and inequalities in education'. Underpinning the article is a belief in the intrinsic power of pedagogy to interrupt dominant paradigms and the article acknowledges the importance of surfacing the role of pedagogic discourse in intensifying existing inequalities. Despite the rising tide of neo-liberalism in education across the world, this article and the special issue that follows provide examples of positive educational practice and spaces of resistance where schools, colleges and other educational institutions are doing things differently.

This Special Issue of *FORUM* represents the culmination of three years of work of the Freedom to Learn Project ([www.freedomtolearnproject.com](http://www.freedomtolearnproject.com)). This project was established by academics working in seven UK-based universities and has built an international network of academics, teachers, doctoral students, parents, trade unionists, community activists and young people. The central focus of the project has been the exploration of educational alternatives, specifically those offering greater degrees of freedom and autonomy to students, and one of the main aims has been to consider how a freer, more democratic education might contribute to a socially just society. The project has been mainly funded by an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) seminar series grant entitled *Thinking the 'Yet to be Thought': an international cross-sector seminar series exploring socially just education and inequalities in education*. Bernstein's (1996) work on the

sociology of education has had a strong influence on our thinking, with his belief in the intrinsic power of pedagogy to interrupt dominant paradigms and in pedagogy as the space to think the unthinkable. However, Bernstein also raised the negative significance of pedagogic discourse and how forces from both inside and outside education can reproduce this discourse in ways that intensify existing inequalities (Moore, 2013). The work of this project thus explores ways in which innovative and alternative approaches to pedagogy might provide opportunities to address inequalities in the context of education and in society beyond education.

Researching the role of pedagogy in social inequality is not a new phenomenon, with educational theorists throughout the last century having explored at length the role of education in advancing social justice (Dewey, 1916/2001; Tawney, 1964; Bernstein, 1970; Bourdieu, 1986; Clark Power et al, 1989). Formal education is widely acknowledged as a crucial means of enabling socio-economic mobility, not simply as the route to better employment but for its role in broadening opportunities for individuals in society (Rao, 2010). What is new, however, is the strengthening tide of opinion that maintains that, far from making progress in terms of social inequality, we are moving backwards not forwards. Many educationalists believe that equality is being pushed back by a wave of neo-liberal pressures that have intensified competition and choice, producing a more diversified and unequal education system (Ball, 2008). It seems that schools, colleges and universities are failing to have an impact on the gap in educational and social 'achievement' between low and high income families (Reay, 2011, 2012). This is evident particularly (but not exclusively) in the UK, with Michael Gove, a previous English Secretary of State for Education, admitting that 'other countries are moving faster ahead' (Shepherd, 2010, no page). This is reflected in countries across the world. Although recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) statistics (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2013) show Finland, Canada and South Korea to be top of the tables for equity, Diane Reay presents, in this issue, a commentary on the worsening inequalities in the education system in Finland, a context once held up as an example of social equality. Similarly, Wayne Au outlines, in his article in this issue, the increasing neo-liberal pressures in the United States and an intensification of focus on high-stakes assessment and its role in reproducing inequalities.

In many countries education policy has been created through explicit neo-liberal agendas, based on individualism, in which schools and universities are set up to compete against one another. Students also compete, and assessment procedures and inspection regimes reinforce this competition (Ball, 2008; Curtis & Pettigrew, 2009). George Myconos and his colleagues in Australia argue, in this issue, that neo-liberal markets permeate the landscape, 'pitting student against student, school against school, state against state, and private interest against public good'. Assessment systems are often inflexible and can promote and provide a context for inequality in both education and society (Au, 2008; Au, this issue, Wrigley, this issue). Overemphasis on performance goals and

summative assessment outcomes can lead to students being risk-averse and to regard other students as competitors (Sambell et al, 2013). The emphasis on competition is intended to drive up standards but has had an adverse affect on equality (Slee, 2001; Reay, 2011; Ainscow et al, 2012). Conversely, educational systems which value collaboration and community, grounded in democratic values and espousing critical pedagogies, offer an alternative to the dominant model (Giroux, 1997; Freire, 2005; Biesta, 2011; Fielding & Moss, 2011; Wrigley et al, 2012; Apple, 2013; Mendus, this issue; Ralls, this issue). They create a sense of belonging for students, a community atmosphere in which individual differences are valued and respected (Gribble, 1998; Hope, 2012). Students work together to achieve collective goals, equality is an explicit aim, and freedom is valued. Here the link between formal and informal education is important, with David Leat and Ulrike Thomas (this issue) noting the potential that the community provides for engaging young people in more equal boundary crossing: '[community] engagement connects the student's learning in school to their life outside school. Disengagement suggests that something has become unhinged between learning and their lived world' (Leat & Thomas, this issue).

So what is the link between equality and freedom? Fielding (2000), drawing on the work of John Macmurray (1949), argues that equality and freedom are twin principles and that one cannot be achieved without the other. If we are to reduce inequality in education, creating an atmosphere in which schools and teachers have autonomy and in which students have freedom to learn is of paramount importance. The concept of freedom in the context of education is contested, however, especially as the phrase has become common in neo-liberal political discourse where the enhancement of freedom is cited as a central driver for educational reforms (Cameron, 2010; Gove, 2010). It is important to clarify that the freedom to which we subscribe is distinct from these neo-liberal agendas, where, more often than not, freedom is inextricably linked with competition and choice, both of which have been shown to intensify rather than reduce inequalities (Reay, this issue). Rather, the freedom that we focus on here is concerned with student autonomy and self-directed learning. This type of freedom can be seen operating within educational settings (schools, colleges, universities and community-based environments) when students *experience* a sense of freedom and a trust that they are capable of making decisions and being active co-creators of learning (Hope & Montgomery, 2016; Steiner, this issue; Draper et al, this issue). Berlin's 'Two Concepts of Liberty' (Berlin, 1969/2007) provide clarity on our understanding of freedom in the context of learning: Berlin outlines the idea of *negative freedom* (freedom from external constraint and external intervention) and *positive freedom* (freedom to self-determine one's own life) (Berlin, 1969/2007). These classifications have been enhanced by Van Parijs' conception of *real freedom*, which encompasses negative freedom and positive freedom but adds a third component, that of 'opportunity' (Van Parijs, 1995/2007). Real freedom, according to Van Parijs, can only be realised if an individual has the power,

ability and means by which to take advantage of their otherwise hypothetical freedoms. In the context of education, these three concepts might be translated as (a) keeping restrictive bureaucratic systems and rules to a minimum (negative freedom); (b) actively enabling students to take responsibility for their own learning and own lives (positive freedom); and (c) supporting students to develop the capacities (agency) to take advantage of freedom (real freedom).

Thus, understanding what freedom means in education involves a complex interplay between 'freedom from', 'freedom to' and 'real freedom'. Through our discussions during the three years of this project and during the ESRC seminar series, we have concluded that this should include *freedom from* overemphasis on high-stakes testing, fixed-ability thinking, rigid bureaucratic rules, constant comparison and competition, narrow interpretations of success, and coercive disciplinary systems; and *freedom to* choose, think, be, learn, create, develop, explore, be accepted, and be respected; and *the real freedom* that comes as a result of having the self-confidence, power and support to be able to fulfil personal ambitions.

This special issue of *FORUM* presents 14 articles, many of which are from new authors. The articles explore alternative and innovative examples and ideas from schools, colleges, universities and non-formal settings from across a range of countries (including Australia, Finland, the USA and UK) and consider whether these alternatives may illuminate approaches to reducing social and educational inequality. The issue as a whole encourages readers to reflect on their own educational assumptions, practices, and systems so as to be open to possibilities of doing things differently. It strives to address the question of what a socially just system might look like and how such a system might address inequalities in society. In order to challenge current thinking as much as possible, our call for articles invited contributors who were able to focus attention on radical alternatives in education. Researchers and practitioners who could focus on innovative and new ways of operating were encouraged to contribute. Their examples were not intended to be showcased as ideal models to emulate but as a means of envisioning alternatives to the systems that dominate in society. By doing this, the special issue editors sought to stimulate ideas and discussion around ways 'yet to be thought', in order to transform education for the future.

Although each article has a specific contribution to make to our understanding of freedom, autonomy, educational alternatives and social justice, we also believe that each article is significantly strengthened by the others. There are many interesting synergies across the articles presented here, and recurring themes include a critiquing of a neo-liberal system that inevitably caters for some children and young people better than others (Au, Draper et al, Myconos et al, Reay); curriculum and pedagogic subversion (Mycroft); exploration of avenues of resistance (Au, Mycroft, Wrigley); presenting ways of being more creative in utilising community expertise (Draper et al, Leat & Thomas); and the importance of giving teachers space to offer freedom and autonomy to students (Steiner). Many specifically focus on presenting cases for

how things might or have been done differently (Myconos et al, Mendus, Ford, Leat & Thomas, Lees, Warwick, Ralls, Steiner), and it is these in particular which open up avenues of 'thinking the yet to be thought'.

There is a wide variety of methodologies represented in the articles and these provide a range of lenses through which we can construct new ways of thinking. Four articles are based on empirical research with students, teachers and/or schools (Mendus, Ralls, Myconos et al, Leat & Thomas), three include elements of policy analysis (Au, Dean, Wrigley), five are theoretically driven position articles (Reay, Wrigley, Lees, Warwick and Ford), and three report on case studies of what is happening in specific organisations on the ground (Mycroft, Mendus, Steiner).

One of the key strengths of this issue is that the articles are written by a wide variety of authors, some of whom fall outside of the conventional groups that might usually be expected to publish in academic journals. We include here articles from both international and UK-based authors, including eminent professors and academics, doctoral students, college lecturers, school teachers and leaders, education practitioners and, possibly most notably, from young people. The article from Draper et al (representing the work of The Warren) in particular is worthy of note as it foregrounds the voices of marginalised young people who posit that they should be included in discussions about improving education. This article is included as an important reminder to everyone committed to social justice that children and young people are not customers or recipients of education but have the potential to be active co-constructors of equitable and socially just educational practice. This array of contributions is reflective of the rich and cross-sectoral nature of the Freedom to Learn Project, which has had the ambition from the outset to bring together disparate voices to share expertise on our common areas of concern, particularly those related to enhancing freedom and autonomy in education and exploring the impact of educational alternatives on reducing social inequalities.

For us as editors, one of the most crucial aspects of this special issue is that it underlines a strength of belief that all is not lost. Despite the rising tide of neo-liberalism in education across the world, there are so many examples of positive educational practice and spaces of resistance where schools, colleges and other educational institutions are doing things differently. So many teachers and educationalists still believe that the purpose of education is to provide opportunities to address society's inequalities and construct an open space where all children, young people and adults, regardless of their backgrounds, can find a freedom to learn.

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